

HOW THE KINGDOM OF GOD GROWS

Mark 4:26-29

Imagine you live in Israel during the first century. The Promised Land is under Roman occupation. The chosen people are oppressed. The Lord promised to send a Messiah-King to restore Israel to glory. But it has been more than four centuries since the Lord last sent Israel a prophet to Israel. It is hard to maintain hope that deliverance will come in your lifetime.

Then you hear reports about Jesus of Nazareth. He makes messianic claims. He speaks as one with authority, not as the scribes and Pharisees. He performs signs and wonders, mighty works. The reports are unbelievable. Then you meet Jesus for yourself. And your life is changed forever. This is no mere carpenter from Nazareth. He is the long-awaited Messiah-King. You are so convinced that you forsake all to follow Jesus. But this is no real sacrifice. You fully expect to be greatly rewarded when Jesus overthrows the Roman Empire and establishes Israel as the world's superpower. Yet you do not follow Jesus long before you temper your expectations. Jesus is everything you think he is. But Jesus meets rejection everywhere you go. It seems the Jewish religious leaders will kill Jesus before the Romans ever get a chance to. How can the kingdom of God prevail if the Messiah-King is a failure?

This was the dilemma the disciples of Jesus faced. They believed Jesus was the Messiah-King. But no one else did, even though the crowds eagerly gathered to hear him speak and see his miracles. Jesus responded by telling a series of parables about the kingdom of God. The word "parable" means, "to throw alongside." Jesus would toss a common experience alongside a spiritual truth to provide understanding. The parables of the kingdom are a distinct category of parables. In the kingdom parables, Jesus simultaneously revealed truth to the openhearted and concealed truth from the hardhearted. Mark 4:26-29 is one of the parables of the kingdom. It is called THE PARABLE OF THE GROWING SEED. It is only recorded in Mark's Gospel and is the only parable unique to Mark. The parable is somewhat ambiguous. But the message is clear. The growth of the kingdom of God in this world is a divine act, not a human accomplishment. This parable of the mysterious growth of the seed teaches us three lessons about how the kingdom of God is at work in the world.

I. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS SOWN INTO THE WORLD.

In verse 26, Jesus says, "*The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.*" This picture of a farmer planting seed illustrates how the kingdom of God is sown into the world.

A. WE SOW THE SEED.

Verse 26 says: "*The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.*" This is where the process starts. Someone must plant seed. Weeds grow natural. Fruit does not. Harvested fruit requires planted seed. The heart of man is

the same way. No one repents, believes, and obeys God naturally. The good seed of the word must be sown into the hearts of men. Ultimately, God sows kingdom seed. God sowed the kingdom by sending his only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, into the world. The INCARNATION of Jesus was an act of God sowing his kingdom in the world. This was also the earthly ministry of Jesus. In word and deed, Jesus sowed the kingdom of God into the world. The ministry of Jesus was the kingdom of God at work. And followers of Jesus are to carry on his work in the world. The church is a sign, herald, and foretaste of God's present-but-not-yet kingdom. We are to sow the seed.

B. THE WORD OF GOD IS THE SEED.

This parable of the mysterious growth of the seed compliments the parable Jesus tells in Mark 4:1-20 called THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER. In reality, the parable is about the soil, not the sower. Jesus tells about a man who plants seed on different types of soil – along the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and into good soil. But only the seed sown on good ground bore fruit. This parable explains why pastors, evangelists, and missionaries sometimes have a crop failure. The problem is not with the seed. The problem is with the soil. Hard hearts, superficial hearts, worldly hearts do not bear fruit. The heart must be right for the seed to grow.

Mark 4:14 says: “The sower sows the word.” The parable of the sower is about the responsibility of those who receive the seed. But the parable of the growing seed is about the responsibility of those who scatter the seed. It is not our job to be soil experts. It is our job to plant the seed. There is life in the seed. There is power in the seed. There is fruit in the seed. This is what the corporate worship of the church is all about. It is not an entertainment show, a pep rally, or group therapy. It is the cultivation of the kingdom of God by the planting and watering of the good seed of the word. The word of God should be the regulating principle of Christian worship. We should read the word. We should pray the word. We should sing the word. We should preach the word. We should enact the word in baptism and the Lord's Table.

C. THE UNBELIEVING WORLD IS THE SOIL.

Where is the seed of the word to be sown? It is sown into the world. The word of God is to be the center of Christian worship. But if it is the center of our worship, we will not be able to contain the life-giving power of the word in our worship. Faith in the power of the seed will broadcast it far and wide. The field is the world, not the church. The kingdom of God is secular in nature. The word is not command to come to church. The church is commanded to go to the world. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus commissions his disciples: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* We are to be a going church for a coming Christ.

II. THE KINGDOM OF GOD GROWS BY ITS OWN POWER.

A group of archeologists discovered and opened an ancient pyramid. Among the artifacts, they found a vase that contained seeds. When they planted the seeds, which were some three thousand years old, they sprouted in a matter of days. There is power in the seed. So it is with the kingdom of God. It grows beyond our comprehension and without our contribution.

A. GOD'S KINGDOM GROWS BEYOND OUR COMPREHENSION.

In verses, 26-27, Jesus says, *"The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows now how."* The farmer's primary duty is to sow seed. There will be no growth or fruit or harvest if he does not scatter seed on the ground. But his work is not done when the seed is planted. The farmer waters, cultivates, and weeds the planted seed to nurture it to harvest. But Jesus does not credit the farmer with his labor to cultivate the seed. Jesus says that after the man scatters the seed, "He sleeps and rises night and day." This picture of the sleeping farmer is not an indictment. Jesus is not calling the man slothful, negligent, or irresponsible. He is making it clear the man is not essential to the growth of the seed. Verse 27 says: *"He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how."*

Beyond doing anything to cause the growth of the seed, the man does not even know how it grows. The farmer is not a botanist. He does not understand the science of plant life. He does not know how it grows. He only knows that if you plow the field, plant the seed, and wait long enough, the harvest will come. The seed grows quietly, secretly, and mysteriously. This is how the kingdom of God grows. Farmers are not scholars. But nature's processes do not fail to operate because they are ignorant. God's work in the world is not hindered or limited because we do not know how God works. I was a curious boy who peppered my dad with questions. My father often responded with a wise answer that caused me to say, "Wow, I didn't know that!" He would gently say, "Son, there's enough that you don't know to start a whole new world." That truth has not changed one degree over the years. And it applies to us all. We do not know how God is at work in the world.

When Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus one night, Jesus confronted him with the fact that he must be born again. Nicodemus could not understand how an old man can be born again. In John 3:8, Jesus says, *"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* This is how sinners are born again. You cannot predict the new birth. You cannot command the new birth. You cannot manipulate the new birth. It is like the wind that blows wherever it wishes. You can hear it and feel it and see its effects. You do not know where it comes from or where it is going. Likewise, we cannot know who or when or when or how the Spirit of God will give new life to a dead sinner. CHARLES SPURGEON wrote: "Explain the new birth,"

somebody says. My answer is, 'Experience the new birth, and you shall know what it is.'"

B. GOD'S KINGDOM GROWS WITHOUT OUR CONTRIBUTION.

Verse 28 says: "*The earth produces by itself.*" No human activity causes the seed to grow. God's kingdom grows without our contribution. The earth produces by itself. The phrase "by itself" translates a Greek word from which we get our English word "automatic." It means "without visible cause." It is the same word Luke used to describe how the angel delivered Peter from prison. Acts 12:10 says: "When they passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him." It took multiple men to open the gate of the city. But when Peter and the angel approached the iron gate, it opened without any human cause. This is how the seed grows in the earth. And this is how the kingdom of God grows.

This parable teaches the growth of the kingdom is the result of both DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY and HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY. God does his part and we do are part. But the emphasis is on the sovereignty of God. Ultimately, it is imprecise to talk of God's part and our part of the work. God does it all. I typically board planes through the foremost door. And I turn right not left. Sometimes I am stuck with a seat in the back. And there are times when I am in first class. I prefer window seats. I can live with an aisle seat. Sometimes I get stuck in the middle seat. But whatever the seat, I go right not left. To go left is to take a seat in the cockpit. I do not know what I'm doing up there. Even if I am in an exit row and am asked to help in an emergency, I will be asked to open a door, not fly the plane. So it is with the church.

1 Corinthians 3:6-7 says, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God gives the growth." Some followed Paul. Some followed Apollos. One planted. The other watered. God made it grow. The one who plants or waters is nothing. The only one that matters is the one who makes the seed grow. We are nothing! God is everything! MARTIN LUTHER, the father of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, said, "I simple taught, preached, and wrote God's word; otherwise I did nothing. While I slept, God reformed the church. I did nothing. The word did it all."

III. THE KINGDOM OF GOD WILL FULLY COME.

There was confusion about the kingdom of God among the religious establishment and Jesus' own disciples. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah-King. His words and works gave validity to these claims. But Jesus did not live up to popular expectations of what the Messiah-King would be and do. They expected a military

hero who would raise an army to defeat the Romans and cast them out of Palestine, reestablishing Israel as a sovereign nation with Jerusalem as its capital and ushering Israel into economic prosperity. But this would-be Messiah was not doing his job.

Jesus the Christ did not come to deliver Israel from Rome. The Lord came to redeem sinners from condemnation. Jesus led a revolution. But he did not do it through civil disobedience, political clout, legal maneuvers, economic strength, or military force. Jesus inaugurated the rule of God on earth by his crucifixion and resurrection. And he will come again to consummate what he has inaugurated. Yet we still get frustrated, discouraged, and impatient about how the kingdom of God grows. This parable of the growing seed helps us to deal with the times when it seems that Jesus is not doing his job.

A. GOD'S WAYS ARE GOOD.

In verse 28, Jesus says, *"The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."* Jesus declares that the earth produces by itself. Then he tells us the process by which it grows: "first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear." The point of a parable is the point of the parable. We must not make the parable stand on all four legs, seeking meaning in every detail. So do not try to interpret what the blade and the ear and the full grain represent. You will miss the forest for the trees that way. This process simply teaches us that God's ways are good. We do not fully understand the process of a seed in the ground becoming a harvest of grain. But we trust God knows what he's doing. The in-breaking rule of God is hidden, quiet, and mysterious. But God knows what he's doing.

B. GOD'S TIMING IS PERFECT.

The Lord works out his sovereign agenda by his perfect timing. Verse 29 says, *"But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."* The seed grows by itself according to God's infinite wisdom. You cannot rush, shortcut, or overrule God's process. The blade doesn't move God. The ear doesn't move God. The full grain in the ear doesn't move God. God does not move until the grain is ripe. Galatians 6:7-9 says: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." Don't let anybody bluff you. You can't make a fool out of God. What you plant is what you will reap. The one who sows to the flesh will from the flesh reap corruption. The one who sows the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. But harvest does not happen in the hurry. God's timing is perfect. He doesn't live in the world of clocks and calendars. He lives in one eternal now. Time is in his hands.

C. GOD'S PLANS ARE UNDEFEATABLE.

Listen to the parable one more time: *"The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself; first the blade; then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."* When Jesus spoke this parable, the crowds these words fall from his lips did not understand what he meant. His disciples didn't understand either. But Jesus explained the kingdom parables to the disciples privately. What do you think he said to his disciples about this parable? I believe Jesus told this parable to teach his disciples that God's plans are undefeatable. As we are sleeping and rising, the seed is at work underneath the ground. We don't know how God is going to fix the problems of sin, poverty, injustice, racism, and war. But do not doubt the power of the seed because you do not know how it grows. The seed grows by itself. God knows what he is doing. God harvest will come. Keep scattering the seed with confidence that the kingdom of God is undefeatable.